

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L VATICAN 001548

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/WE: LEVIN; NEA/IPA; IO/UNP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/16/2014

TAGS: [IS](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [PREL](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: VATICAN RAISES CONCERNS ON PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENT,
SHARON PLAN

REF: A. STATE 84066

[1](#)B. 03 VATICAN 5748

[1](#)C. VATICAN 1445

Classified By: Ambassador Jim Nicholson for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Holy See Country Director for Israel Franco Coppola told Poloff April 16 that the Holy See had concerns about both the Presidential statement issued April 14 and PM Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan. Coppola said that the USG's consent for Israel to keep some parts of the West Bank it has occupied since 1967 and to deny the right of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel left the Palestinians with no leverage and left Israel completely "in the driver's seat." Although he agreed that the U.S. position on the land and refugee issues reflected current realities, he said the move was bound to sit poorly with the Arab world and with many in Europe. Coppola was also concerned about language in the statement that endorsed what he said might be unilateral or excessive Israeli military measures. He acknowledged several ref (a) points, such as the positive nature of the decision to remove any settlements, and the need for the Palestinian leadership to act more decisively against terror. Comments by Catholic officials in the media contributed to a negative buzz on the issue. End Summary.

Israel in the Driver's Seat

[1](#)2. (C) Holy See Country Director for Israel Franco Coppola told us April 16 that the Vatican had concerns about the Presidential statement issued April 14 and PM Sharon's plan to withdraw settlements from Gaza. Coppola acknowledged that it was "unthinkable" for Israel to withdraw to the pre-1967 borders, and likewise impossible that Palestinians could have the right of return to a future Israeli state. At the same time, he believed that taking these items "off the table" left the Palestinians with no leverage and left Israel "completely in the driver's seat." This was bound to sit poorly with the Arab world -- and many Europeans, he said. Poloff shared ref (a) points with Coppola and emphasized the opportunity that existed for progress with Sharon's initiative; we pointed out (and he agreed) that the removal of settlements would be a historic, precedent-setting measure. In addition, we underlined that the U.S. had no intention of prejudicing the outcome of permanent status negotiations.

Israel's Capacity to Deter and Defend

[1](#)3. (C) Coppola said that further Holy See reaction to the plan and the Presidential statement would depend on the interpretation of some of the language used. He was curious about the statement's reference to Israel as a "Jewish state," and wondered what implications that might have for religious freedom in the country. Coppola expressed concern over the implications of the portion of the statement that emphasized the USG commitment to "preserve and strengthen Israel's capability to deter and defend itself, by itself, against any threat or possible combination of threats." To Coppola, this smacked of unilateral and potentially excessive action of which the Holy See did not approve. Further, the section on "prevent(ing) the areas from which Israel has withdrawn from posing a threat that would have to be addressed by any other means" seemed to him ominous and vague.

Leadership Vacuum

[1](#)4. (C) Coppola also questioned how likely it was that the U.S. and others could "foster...new leadership" in Palestine. "You can't force leaders on the people," he said. "You have

to work with those who already command the allegiance of the people." We noted the failure of the current Palestinian leadership to meet its responsibilities in reform and the suppression of terrorism. Coppola agreed that Palestinian leadership had not done enough against terror and admitted that it had not been helpful to the peace process.

Media Plays Negative Catholic Comments

15. (U) Vatican media have picked up some negative comments by Holy See officials and other Catholics in the Holy Lands, contributed to the public impression of Vatican concern about the Sharon Plan. Cardinal Renato Martino, head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and a persistent and vocal critic of U.S. policy in the region (ref b), asserted that it seemed "unjust" for the U.S. and Israel "not to listen to the other side" given that there were two contending parties. Another Catholic church source based in the region was quoted by the widely read Catholic News Service as declaring that the plan represented an "overwhelming victory for Israel and a catastrophic defeat for the Palestinians." "The road map is over," the source added, claiming that "Peace (in the Middle East) is doomed."

Comment

16. (C) The Holy See continues to regard the Israel-Palestinian conflict as "the mother of all conflicts" in the region and a source of anti-Western feeling that contributes to the growth of terrorism throughout the Middle East. The Vatican also hears a steady stream of reports from religious workers active in the Palestinian Territories of humiliations endured by Palestinians and hardships facing those who work with them. A group of American religious leaders who called on the Ambassador this week noted that they routinely had to allot 3 hours for an 8 mile trip to attend a meeting outside of Jerusalem. Even Vatican Cardinals lecturing in the area were sometimes turned back or harassed at checkpoints. All of this has contributed to an increasingly tense relationship between the Holy See and Israel (ref c). Resolution of current visa and residency issues as recently promised by the Israeli government would be an important step forward.

Nicholson

NICHOLSON

NNNN

2004VATICA01548 - Classification: CONFIDENTIAL